The Focus Group Research Method: Fundamentals to Practice

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Beverly A. Gresehover
Alexa Mayo, AHIP
M.J. Tooey, AHIP

Health Sciences and Human Services Library
University of Maryland
Our Objectives for Today’s Presentation…

- Define the focus group research method
- Outline the process for using the focus group model
- Discuss focus groups at our library
- Identify the challenges of using this model
- Identify rewards of using this model
- Discuss how to get started – helpful hints and lessons learned
- Conduct a short hands-on activity
- Provide resources for further investigation of focus groups as an evaluation model
This is a presentation regarding our experiences with focus groups. In no way should this presentation of our earnest, but occasionally flawed usage of focus groups be construed as a substitute for taking a class from a qualified instructor. We’re still learning.
Focus Groups

The focus group technique involves a small group of people brought together to discuss a topic in which participants share knowledge.
Why Use Focus Groups?

- Qualitative research method that gathers individual perceptions and impressions in context.
- Adaptable for different issues and audiences.
- Our uses
  - Evaluation of products and services
  - Needs assessment for future directions
  - Provision of a venue for direct contact with constituents for feedback on critical issues
Our Use of Focus Groups

- Web site redesign - Fall 2004
- Library reorganization planning - Fall 2004
- Health Information Outreach Planning Summits (Maryland State Planning Meetings) - December 2004 - April 2005
- Medical Library Association (MLA) Web Redesign - May 2006
- Development of Alumni/Associates Resources Package - Fall 2007
- Future - Assessment and evaluation of new services for new constituents (BioPark)
- Future – Assessment of staff training and development needs
Requires a moderator  Requires an observer

Focus Group Elements

6 - 10 participants  1 - 2 hour session

Record Discussion

transcribe  analyze
code
Focus Group Session
Moderator Role

- Listens actively
- Guides and paces the discussion
- Poses questions
- Stays neutral and objective
- Ensures closure
Observer Role

- Takes discussion notes, verbatim
- Records discussion
- Notes non-verbal behavior
- May probe; summarize to close
- Debriefs with moderator
Focus Group Process

Pre-session
- Develop and sequence questions
- Obtain IRB approval/exemption
- Select participants

Facilitate/observe and record sessions

Post-session
- Debrief
- Transcribe recording
- Perform data analysis (coding)
- Review data for conclusions
Planning and Preparation

- Learn skills
- Get IRB approval
- Select participants
- Prepare physical setting ahead
- Create effective questions
- Test questions, if possible
Effective Questions

- Meet project goals
- Encourage maximum discussion
- Enable comfortable discussion
- Avoid yes or no answers

**Q.** “Do the Library’s reference assistants adequately meet your information needs?”

- Avoid asking Why?
Effective Questions

- Open-ended
  Q. “What can HS/HSL do to attract and retain new librarians”?
- Clear, easily understood, short, jargon-free, neutral and positive
- Move from general to specific, easy to hard, past to future
- Sequenced to answer most important questions last
Focus Group Questions

Q. How do you use the web for research in your work or classes?

Q. Think about 1 or 2 of your favorite web sites. What do you like about the design or look of those sites?

Q. You are at your ideal library website. Think about what you would want to be able to do and how you would want to do it.
Debriefing Begins

Checking the recording prior to debriefing
Data Analysis Steps - Transcription

- Debrief
- Transcribe discussion tapes
- Transcribe observer notes
- Annotate discussion transcription with nuances noted by the observer
Data Coding
Data Analysis Steps - Coding

- Select coding system
- Code transcript
- Arrange coded data into categories
- Analyze each category for interpretation
- Draw conclusions
- Prepare report
Library Projects

- Web site redesign
- Health Information Outreach Planning Summits (State Planning Meetings)
- Library reorganization planning
Web Redesign

- Gathered data for design of web site
- 3 interviews, 1 hour long
- 18 volunteers
  - Faculty only (5)
  - Students only (4)
  - Faculty, staff, students (9)
- Asked 6 questions
- Served lunch
Outcome

- We were able to gather specific information

- This was the most effective method of gathering data for our redesign
State Planning Meetings

- Gathered data to improve access to health information throughout the state, funded by NN/LM, SE/A award
- 4 half-day meetings in Maryland
- Asked 4 questions in one-hour sessions
Participants

- Librarians, social workers, nurses, school administrators, a parish nurse, a pharmacist, a nutritionist, a physician

- 58 attendees (between 9-19 attendees per summit)
  - 16 health department workers
  - 11 public librarians
  - 8 medical/hospital librarians
  - 6 Area Health Education Center employees
  - 5 members of community-based organizations
  - 12 others
Pre-session
- Obtained IRB approval/exemption
- Developed questions- several times
- Selected participants- sent packets
- Visited venue day before sessions

Facilitated/observed and recorded sessions

Post-session
- Debriefed
- Transcribed Recordings
- Performed Data Analysis
- Reviewed Data for Conclusions
IRB Approval

- Institutional Review Board approval is required for research involving human subjects
- Start planning early to gain IRB approval
Focus Group Questions

Q. In your experience in Baltimore, what specific populations are the most underserved? Why is it difficult to deliver services to these populations?

Q. How have any of your projects included health information?

Q. Think about one or two community projects that included delivery of health information to either staff or clients. How could that health information have been improved?

Q. In what ways do you get health information to your clients? Could this be improved? If so, how?
Outcome

Baltimore City

Homeless
Immigrants with language barriers
Teenagers aged out of foster care
Employed single women with no healthcare
Families suffering from substance abuse
Adaptability

- Focus group process may be adapted to fit the needs of the project
  - Consider resources available (time, staff, money)
  - Project purpose should determine level of analysis
Library Reorganization

- Conducted 23 large and small group sessions to gather data for Library reorganization

- Techniques applied
  - Question development
  - Facilitating and observing
Sample Questions

Q. How do you see your work or the work of your unit changing in the next few years?

Q. If the Library moves to a 2-division model, Services and Resources, where do you see your work unit fitting, and why?

Q. What would you change in this Library to enable you to do your work better and make your work life more satisfying?
New organizational structure, July 2005
Challenges

- Identifying participants
- Staying objective
- Knowing when *not* to act as facilitator/observer
- Transcribing the audio
- Debriefing and timely analysis
- Allocating the time
Keys to Success

- Attend focus group training
- Plan ahead for IRB exemption
- Test the questions
- Assess room set-up/site visit
- Display questions during the session
- Offer incentives - food
- Consider partnering with others
Our Training

- MLA class, *Focus Group Interviewing: A Qualitative Research Methodology for the Library*


- Conducted mock focus groups
  - Practiced question development, facilitating, observing
  - Invited feedback from participants
Getting Started

- Attend Training


http://www.ala.org
Effective Questions for Today’s Exercise

- Develop 3 questions
- Open-ended; avoid yes/no answers
- Clear, jargon-free, easily understood
- Move from general to specific, easy to hard, past experience to future projections
- Make the final question the most important
Scenario 1: Collaboration Space

Your library is renovating and you have an opportunity to create a collaborative learning and teaching space. You will use the information gathered at focus group sessions to plan the optimal configuration, considering size, tools, furnishings, etc. Identify the groups of users invited to participate. Develop three questions that will help with planning your collaboration space.

Participants: Students, faculty (instructors and full faculty), teaching librarians, IT staff, academic support staff, library staff, maintenance staff

Questions:
1. Thinking about working with others in one lab – what kinds of things do you do? What kind of space would be useful?
2. What kinds of computers, software, or other technology would make it easier to do what you want to do?
3. How often do you think you would use this kind of space? How many people do you think would work together?
4. Thinking about working in groups in the library, what would the ideal space for that look like?
5. What would the furnishings be like in this space?
6. How would the room be equipped in terms of technology – hardware, software, screens, listening devices, etc.?
7. What current needs are not being met?
8. How do you use the space in the library when working in groups?
9. What kind of group work is assigned in your classes?
10. Where else on campus do you go to do group work and what do you like about it?
11. Describe the ideal space for group work. What does it look like? What equipment is available? Who’s there?
Scenario 2: Alumni access

Your campus alumni are eager for offsite access to your digital collections. In response, the Library is developing a suite of resources and services that alumni can purchase. You will use the information gathered at focus group sessions to develop an alumni package. Identify the groups of users invited to participate. Develop three focus group questions that will enable this new venture to succeed.

Participants: Alumni, Alumni who currently come to the library, Alumni affairs office, IT, Reference librarians, Graduating students, Development officers/fund raisers, Librarians, Financial officers,

Questions:
1. Which electronic resources do you remember most fondly from your time at school?
2. Which resource do you think would be useful to you now? Personally? Professionally?
3. How much would you be willing to pay for the resources you want?
4. How do you see yourself using the digital collections?
5. What digital resources would you like to see available?
6. How much do you think access to these resources is worth?
7. How might you use digital information if available
8. What resources should be included in the alumni suite and how would you like to access it?
Scenario 3 – Cultural Programming

As more resources and services are online, your library has experienced reduced foot traffic and the impression that the “library-as-place” is unimportant. Your library aims to enliven its environment by hosting cultural events such as art exhibits, speakers, symposia, lecture series, etc. You will use the information gathered at focus group sessions to expand programming so that the library becomes a campus destination point. Identify the groups of users invited to participate. Develop three questions that will help with creating your programming.

**Participants:** Users, Non-users, Faculty/staff/public in separate groups, providers of cultural programming, co-sponsors, community

**Questions:**
1. What kind of programming do you attend elsewhere? Describe programs you would like to attend here.
2. When do you attend programs? Time of the day? Day of the week?
3. How would you like to find out about programs? How do you find out about events you currently attend?
4. What types of events do you like to attend?
5. What types of events are not offered on campus or locally that you would like to attend?
6. When during the year/semester or time of day would you most likely attend?
7. What brings you to the library? What keeps you away from the library?
8. What are your favorite places on campus? What appeals to you about those places?
9. What types of cultural events would bring you to the library?
10. Provide group with a list of possible events and ask the participants to react. Would they attend? What sounds interesting?
11. What cultural activities do you enjoy in your free time?
12. What time of the day and days of the week do you enjoy a break from your studies?
13. Do you come to the library, and if so, what do you usually do there? And if not, tell us why not?
Scenario 4: Recruitment of librarians

You have experienced problems recruiting librarians to entry level positions at your small liberal arts college library. You will use the information gathered at focus group sessions to attract a greater pool of applicants. Identify the groups of users invited to participate. Develop three questions that will enable you to improve your applicant pool.

**Participants:** Library school students, Recent grads, Librarians at similar colleges, Recent hires at similar collects, Directors of college libraries with recent hires, Career services at library schools, Search committee, Library staff

**Questions:**
1. What are you looking for in a job?
2. What other factors are important to you?
3. What is your reaction to this library's ad?
4. What skills would you like to use in an entry level position?
5. What's your expectation about benefits offered by an institution?
6. What are the top 3 or 4 ways you read job postings and decide to apply?
7. What 2 or 3 things should we emphasize with applicants?
8. What position factors/characteristic would entice you on a application?
9. What are the most important factors that would discourage your application?
10. What steps would you take to increase the application pool?
11. Describe your search process.
12. What are the skills you would like to use?
13. What is their reaction to ads for the position?
14. What is their reaction to the benefits offered by the institution?
Scenario 5: E-books Access

Your library licenses over 400 e-book titles. Reference staff has reported that users are often confused about how to find e-books, especially from a subject perspective. You will use the information gathered at focus group sessions to improve e-book access.

Identify the groups of users invited to participate. Develop three questions that will help you to improve e-book access in your library.

Participants: Students, Faculty

Questions:
1. Describe your experience searching for e-books. What went right? What went wrong?
2. If you could design a system from scratch to search for e-books what would it look like?
3. How would you like access to work?
4. Describe your experience with e-books, both using and finding them.
5. Where do you want to look for e-books in your subject area of area of interest?
6. What can the library do to help promote e-book access?
University of Maryland
Health Sciences and Human Services Library

Beverly Gresehover, bgreseho@hshsl.umaryland.edu
Alexa Mayo, amayo@hshsl.umaryland.edu
M.J. Tooey, mjtooey@hshsl.umaryland.edu